

Do we need to rethink Child Friendly Spaces?

This study examined the evidence on the longer-term outcomes and impacts of a commonly used humanitarian intervention known as child friendly spaces (CFS). The findings suggest a need for humanitarian actors to rethink the design and implementation of CFS; and continue to evaluate CFS within their overall approach to child protection in emergencies.

Impact of CFS varies greatly

For more than two decades CFS has been a key child protection intervention in humanitarian crises. However, there has been little robust research into CFS impact. This first-of-its-kind study of 23 Child Friendly Spaces in Uganda, Jordan and Nepal, found major differences in both short and longer term impacts. Younger children consistently showed greater improvements in psychosocial well-being but there was little evidence of impact on older children. Evidence also suggested that most of the short term benefits attributed to CFS attendance are not apparent a year following the intervention, as other children 'catch up'. This study was part of a wider collaborative research project in response to evidence needs identified globally in the humanitarian sector and the collaborators continue to produce evidence to guide improved delivery and evaluation of CFS through further studies.



Drawing is part of educational and therapeutic activities in Child Friendly Spaces run by World Vision for children who fled conflict in South Sudan and settled in the West Nile Region of Uganda. Marcus Simaitis/World Vision

Background

From risks of violence and abuse to disruption of development, humanitarian crises present major threats to the physical and psychosocial health and wellbeing of children. As the primary intervention used by humanitarian organisations to address these threats, CFS interventions are designed to provide an environment safe from risk and opportunities for children, parents, and the wider community to access activities and resources that promote children's wellbeing. Despite the widespread use of CFS, there has been little evidence on whether CFS regularly achieve these outcomes or contribute to longer term impact.

Recognizing this, key global actors in the humanitarian system, including the Child Protection Working Group (CPWG) of the Global Protection Cluster identified CFS research as a high priority. Between 2012 and 2016, World Vision and Columbia University worked with partners from the Global Alliance for Child Protection to carry out both short and longer term impact evaluations of CFS.

How the research was conducted

Children were evaluated before CFS interventions began in three key areas of well-being, development and protection. Over 1000 children and 1200 caregivers participated. After several months of CFS attendance, the same measurements were made a second time, and, finally, several months after CFS attendance had stopped, a third time. By evaluating both children who attended CFS and children who did not, we were able to compare differences between them to determine the impact of attending CFS.

Key findings

Findings provided insights on both the short and longer-term impacts of CFS on children's well-being and development.

Short-Term Impacts

- CFS had positive impact on psychosocial well-being of younger children but little evidence was found of CFS impact on older children
- Major differences were seen across settings
- Implementation quality varied and was critical to whether CFS had impact

Long-Term Impacts

- Short term benefits largely dissipated with time as other children 'caught up'
- A proportion of children, unreached by CFS and other services, constitute the most vulnerable
- In all locations, regardless of CFS, protection concerns and mental health symptoms improved over time, while, in contrast, resilience and developmental assets decreased over time
- Little evidence was found that CFS contribute to a greater understanding of available community resources for protection.

Implications for humanitarian practitioners and policymakers

This research tells us:

- Humanitarians need to use broad programming approaches for children, beyond CFS, to adequately address children's protection and long term mental and psychosocial health needs
- CFS interventions can have positive impact but are not always appropriate and must be adapted to the context when they are
- Quality and adherence to existing standards is crucial for impact
- Consistent attendance is important
- There is still potential for increasing the positive impact of CFS
- Engaging youth with CFS is challenging so interventions need to be explicitly shaped to their interests and circumstances
- There is great potential for CFS to help children engage with organisations providing humanitarian assistance, and through this, better understand how they can report protection concerns.

Keywords

Children, disasters, humanitarian emergencies, refugees, children affected by conflict, mental health, psychosocial wellbeing, child protection, humanitarian research.

Recommendations for future research

Much more research is needed, to fully understand the impact of Child Friendly Spaces programming, including activities suited to specific circumstances such as disaster preparedness and peace-building activities. Further research is underway to the toolkits used in Child Friendly Spaces, building on the findings of this project.

About the study team

A team from World Vision and Columbia University worked with partners from the Global Alliance for Child Protection to carry out the research between 2012 and 2016.

The research team:

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Articles and further reading

[BMC Public Health](#), May 2019

[Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry](#), May 2019

[World Vision International](#), September 2019

[Columbia University](#), September 2019

[Queen Margaret University](#), September 2019

Elrha: <https://www.elrha.org/project/wvi-mental-health-call1/>



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www.elrha.org/programme/r2hc